

STAGE REVIEW; Underground performance makes stew of Martha

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Underground performance makes stew of Martha

"Martha Stewart in the Underworld," Thursday night, Zeitgeist Gallery, Cambridge.

Some people want to free Martha Stewart. Some like to see her behind bars.

Multimedia artist Mitchel Ahern has a performance art piece that would amuse and/or confuse both parties, along with hand-cut-block-printed T-shirts to please fan and foe alike.

Ahern uses writings by and about Martha to supplement his theory that Martha can be viewed through a prism of eternal archetypes - all the while accompanying himself with sounds he fashions out of handmade instruments such as the ElectroLuxoPipeO'Phone and Leaf Springoleon.

Did I mention it's performance art?

It's not for everyone, but if you think "Saturday Night Live" skits could use a little more absurdity - and by a little more, I mean a lot more - then perhaps this show holds some appeal.

As Ahern warned the audience, "There may be humor involved."

The audience - quite small on this night - also has ample warning that not all of his instruments find as much harmony as Martha Stewart sought in her career.

The ElectroLuxoPipeO'Phone, essentially a set of organ pipes attached to a vacuum cleaner, calls for earplugs. Various noisemakers are affixed to an old crutch. As Ahern describes his "Hand-Made Record," a steel record album that's been tooled by hand, he acknowledges that it sounds awful. "We'll all be acquainted with the terrible in a few moments," he says.

Then again, the Martha Stewart riches-to-prison-to-riches saga is more than a tad absurd when viewed in hindsight.

Ahern attempts to make some sense out of Martha through the sonic dissonance by talking about the myth of Martha in metaphors.

An essay about party hosting from Stewart's book "Entertaining" provides a description of Martha as kitchen goddess.

A police report of a dispute between Stewart and her neighbor's contractors serves as the backdrop to a discussion about Martha as goddess of destruction.

Martha's letter to stockholders in the 1999 annual report for Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia supports Ahern's argument that Martha has "a sublimated sense of transcendence." Her letter ends by suggesting: "We believe that everybody should learn something new every day," implying that Martha will teach Americans everything they need to know.

Ahern doesn't go so far as to think he'll "turn dreamers into doers," as Stewart claimed to do in her stockholders' letter. But his show might help you put this whole Martha Stewart business into its proper, absurd perspective.